

Untitled document

By Donna Jordan

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New Hampshire's newly elected U.S. Congressman Charlie Bass found during a recent tour of his district that the Northern Pass transmission line was the number one topic on everyone's minds.

In a telephone interview with the Chronicle, Congressman Bass explained that, following his election last November, he began to hear from his constituents about the project.

"The purpose of my tour, which started in Salem and ended in Pittsburg, was to reacquaint myself with the district and to talk about every conceivable issue," said Congressman Bass, "The issue of the Northern Pass was dominating," he said. "In Coos County, in Grafton County, and in the city of Franklin," which is also in his district.

As to the Northern Pass, said the Congressman, he is trying to listen to his constituents.

"Understand that I did not hear anything about this project until mid-November, so I am attempting to listen to as many different individuals and groups as I can to find all the various facets about this complex and very important decision being made," he said. "I put up three or four criteria," to decide if a project should move forward.

"Is the project consistent with my interests in promoting New Hampshire's clean, renewable energy needs; is it good for the energy needs of New Hampshire; will it positively impact the economy; will it have a negative environmental impact or an undue negative impact on the environment," said Congressman Bass. "I'm trying to figure out where this project is in this criteria."

He said he learned the notice of intent for the project was being filed on Friday, Feb. 11, and that public meetings would be held in the state for comments on the scope of the environment and the impact statement.

There are five meetings scheduled for mid-March, and the Colebrook meeting will be held on Saturday, March 19, from 1-4 p.m.

"I think the DOE process will take, if I'm judging correctly, about 18 to 24 months to be completed. Then there will be the state Site Evaluation Committee, the USDA and the EPA; this is something that's not going to happen tomorrow," said the Congressman. "I may submit my own comments during the DOE public hearing process," he said.

"I'm also endeavoring to find out how the agreement that is being proposed is actually structured. Who are the key decision makers here? I'm trying to figure out the justification or criteria on how this route was developed. Why was it selected, what were the alternatives, why were they eliminated?" he said.

"I think this line is conceptual, it hasn't really been finalized. I want to find out where Hydro-Quebec is on this issue. How set in stone are they on their current plans? What are the other options; what are the alternatives? What other types of transmission could be used or other locations for this? As I figure all this out, I want to try to come up with a plan to try to resolve this from a standpoint for the North Country to determine if the power is needed," said Congressman Bass.

He has talked, he said, with the Independent System Operators (ISO) which controls the flow of power throughout New England. "I also hope to communicate with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). This is why there is so much information to be determined here," he said.

"The DOE review and the Site Evaluation Committee (SEC) in New Hampshire, based upon what I know now, will be the critical forums," he said. "I'm not at the point here where I can speak intelligently about the scope of options available" added the Congressman.

"Part of what came out of the meetings with North Country citizens is that, no one could answer any of the questions I was posing—they didn't know much about the science of putting up power lines, the costs and such. So I need to understand everything before I move on this," he said, assuring residents that he would make sure they are aware of public meetings and opportunities to speak out on the project.

"I can assure constituents that I am concerned about issues associated with the Northern Pass. I think that the North Country is a fragile part of my district, both economically and environmentally. We have spent, as public policy makers, a lot of time trying to protect the economy and trying to build a new economy, both in manufacturing and tourism. I don't want to be a part of a process that turns that clock back. On the other hand, I cannot make a decision based on incomplete information. I will be involved in this project, but the number one goal is to make sure the North Country's interests are not ignored. If I feel the Northern Pass project is not adequately addressing the goals and needs of the North Country, I will not support it. But I am not at that point yet," he said.

"The fact finding side is going to take another few weeks, and I will work with the rest of the delegation, perhaps meeting with them in March, to see if the three of us (Senator Shaheen and Senator Ayotte) can move together as a team," he suggested.

The Congressman said he would like to plan another district- wide tour to the state in the next week or so, and may even consider hosting a town hall-style meeting to try to gain more information from the public regarding the Northern Pass proposal.